

Johnny Cash (1932 - 2003)



Johnny Cash performs in 1968 at Folsom Prison in California. Columbia Records released an album of the concert.

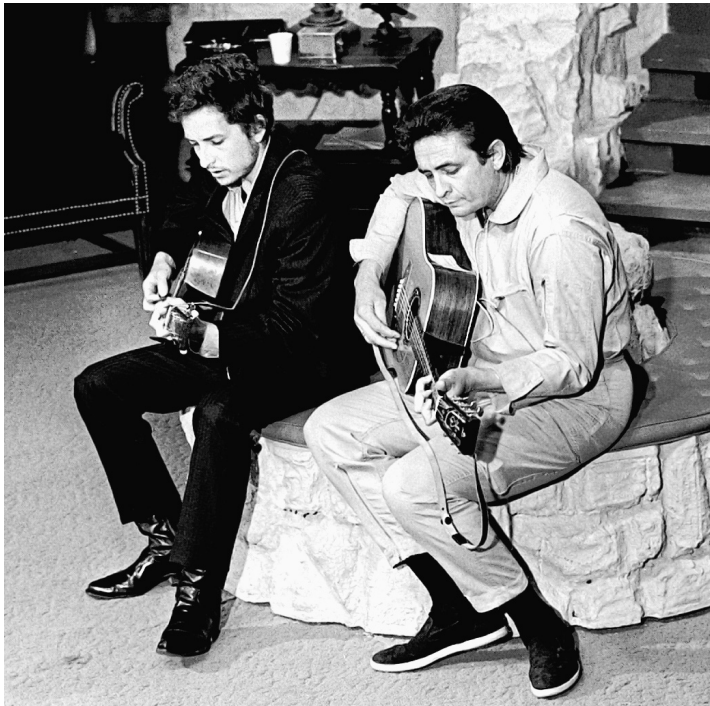
PHOTO BY JIM MARSHALL; LEGACY / COLUMBIA FILE

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Johnny Cash and wife June Carter Cash prepare to leave Madison Hospital with baby son, John Carter Cash, in 1970.

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One taping of *The Johnny Cash Show* featured Cash, right, performing with controversial folk rock luminary Bob Dylan.

said. "They ain't got no reason to give you any clout that you don't deserve. And we saw the truth that day."

Unhappy with several matters, including Phillips' refusal to let him record a gospel album, Mr. Cash left Sun in 1958, moving his family (which by then included two daughters) to California. Phillips was angered, charging that the young singer had secretly signed a deal with Columbia Records while still under contract to Sun. The two later reconciled, and Mr. Cash was an honorary pallbearer at Phillips' funeral in July.

While his decades on Columbia would see Mr. Cash rise to greater wealth and fame, many Cash-watchers consider the finest of the Sun recordings to be the apex of his career. On *Get Rhythm*, *Train of Love*, *Home of the Blues*, *I Walk the Line*, *Big River* and others, Phillips' recording techniques present Mr. Cash's voice as an unpretentious wonder, and Phillips' interest in producing something singular and identifiable helped Mr. Cash to find his own way as an artist.

"When it dawned on me that I didn't sound like anybody else naturally, I let it come naturally," Mr. Cash told journalist Bill Flanagan in 1998. "Of course, that was the secret of my success. It ain't no secret: Be yourself."

Chapter 3:
To the Top

A July 1958 session in Nashville with producer Don Law marked Cash's ascendance to the major label ranks, as he began work on songs that

would comprise his Columbia debut album, *The Fabulous Johnny Cash*. A western song from that album, *Don't Take Your Guns to Town*, topped the country charts for six weeks in 1959, and Mr. Cash entered a new decade as a well-established artist in his prime.

"The 1960s were probably my most productive time, creatively speaking," he wrote in *Cash*. "Often I wasn't in my best voice, because the amphetamines dried my throat and reduced me, at times, to croaks and whispers, but that wasn't the story all the time, and my energy and output were high."

Mr. Cash's drug use escalated. He destroyed hotel rooms, canceled shows, started fires, wrecked cars, was busted for illegal acquisition of pills, bashed out the *Grand Ole Opry* footlights and alienated himself from his wife and four daughters.

"I'd begin to feel good after two or three days without drugs," he wrote. "Then, though, I'd get home, usually on a Monday, and I'd find the stress of my marriage so hard that I'd drive to that druggist, get two or three hundred pills, head out into the desert in my camper, and stay out there, high, for as long as I could."

On Feb. 11, 1962, June Carter joined the Johnny Cash road show. She was a daughter of acoustic guitar great Mother Maybelle Carter and member of the Carter clan, a group known as "The First Family of Country Music." For some time Mr. Cash had been enthralled by her beauty, humor and talent, and she quickly recognized both Mr. Cash's magnetism and apparent need for a caretaker.

In addition to flushing pills and soothing nerves, she wrote Mr. Cash a song that described

anxious feelings about their escalating relationship. It would become one of his best-known hits: Penned by Carter and Merle Kilgore, *Ring of Fire* hit No. 1 in 1963.

"A song like that goes on forever," Mr. Cash told *The Tennessean* in 2002.

While much of musical Nashville ignored the burgeoning folk movement, Mr. Cash embraced some of the folk artists and ideologies. He appeared at the New York Folk Festival in 1965, recorded a duet with Carter on Bob Dylan's *It Ain't Me Babe* in 1964, recorded a concept album about Native American life called *Bitter Tears* and publicly supported the civil rights movement.

"When I was young, I saw my dad speaking out against the Vietnam War, speaking out against the Ku Klux Klan, and that's where my social activism is rooted," daughter Rosanne Cash told *The Tennessean*. "He never bent. He never even almost bent."

A thoughtful voice of inclusion and a conduit for crosspollination between folk and country artists, in the mid-1960s Mr. Cash also could be an angry and violent man prone to benders and outbursts.

"The mixture of amphetamines and alcohol was a maddening poison," he wrote in *Man in Black*. "My wife and children feared the strange man I had become."

In early 1967 he and Vivian divorced, amid much pill-fueled debauchery, but by late 1967, Mr. Cash committed himself to getting off drugs, though his Jan. 13, 1968, show at Folsom Prison was proof that he was still quite in touch with his dark side.

At Folsom he delighted prisoners, cursing and joking and singing about egg-sucking dogs and the *Cocaine Blues* with a carnality and wildness that was at once thrilling, entertaining and empathetic. The show's recording, released as *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*, now is considered one of the most significant albums in country music history.

For Mr. Cash, 1968 offered moments both wonderful and tragic. He proposed to June Carter onstage Feb. 1, and married her a month later. He set about making up concert dates he'd missed when he was too strung out, and he released two chart-topping hits. But in August 1968, longtime bandmate and "boom-chicka-boom" innovator Luther Perkins died in a house fire. Guitarist Bob Wooten soon joined the band, becoming a part of a group that featured Marshall Grant, drummer W.S. "Fluke" Holland and original Sun rockabilly Carl Perkins.

The change in marital status and lifestyle coincided with an

"I always felt he had a great heart and a capacity for people, that's why he did so well."

— Natalie Cole

♦ ♦ ♦

"He was the greatest man ever picked a guitar. He spoke to the American man. He did songs people could understand and relate to."

— Truck driver Bobby Williams of Spokane, Wash. En route from Tennessee to Tampa, Fla., Williams stopped and bowed his head for a moment when he heard Cash had died.

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"Bigger than any musical genre was Johnny Cash. He was an American music icon who set the standard for how to make music on your own terms."

— Tim McGraw

♦ ♦ ♦

"The world has lost a legend, and I have lost a friend. Johnny Cash was the rare soul who could be both."

— Emmylou Harris

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"Johnny Cash has always seemed larger than life to me. He is a true American hero, beloved the world over as much for his kindness and compassion and championing of the underdog as for the power of his art. He's been my inspiration, my faithful friend, my champion — a constant oasis of unconditional love and support."

— Kris Kristofferson

♦ ♦ ♦

"It surprised some people that he could come back like he did, for a new generation, but once you're great you're always great. I don't care how old you are."

— Kenny Chesney

♦ ♦ ♦

"Man, an earthquake hit us this morning. Every place I've been in the world, and I've just about been all around it, they all know Johnny Cash."

— Merle Kilgore, longtime friend and co-writer (with June Carter) of *Ring of Fire*.

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"I know both Johnny and June will always be looking down and watching over us all. The stars in heaven are just a little brighter."

— Loretta Lynn

1960s

(Continued from previous page)

1961: Daughter Tara is born.

1962: June Carter joins the Johnny Cash road show.

1963: *Ring of Fire*, written by June Carter and Merle Kilgore, becomes a No. 1 hit.

1967: Mr. Cash and wife Vivian are divorced.

1968: Marries June Carter, and

the pair win Grammy awards for their duet on *Jackson*. The landmark *At Folsom Prison* album is recorded: It would spend more than 90 weeks on the chart. Guitarist Luther Perkins dies in a house fire.

1969: Most commercially successful year of Mr. Cash's career. Records with Bob Dylan and contributes Grammy-winning liner notes to Dylan's *Nashville Skyline* album. Makes the second

of two classic prison albums, this one at San Quentin in California. Begins starring in *The Johnny Cash Show*, an ABC-TV program that features Mr. Cash with stars from various genres of music.

Wins Grammy awards for male country vocal performance and for best album notes.

1970s

1970: A son, John Carter Cash, is born to the Cashes. Mr. Cash

performs for President Nixon but doesn't grant a Nixon aide's request to play Guy Drake's *Welfare Cadillac* or Merle Kilgore's *Okie From Muskogee*. Mr. Cash wins two Grammys in 1970,

one for the Dylan liner notes and one for male country vocal performance.

1971: The Cashes win a Grammy for their duet on Tim Hardin's *If I Were A Carpenter*. *The*

Johnny Cash Show's final episode is taped. The Cashes go to Tel Aviv, Israel, to make a film about the life of Jesus. That movie, *The Gospel Road*, would be released in 1974.

1975: Mr. Cash publishes his first autobiography, *Man in Black*.1976: Mr. Cash has final No. 1 hit as a solo artist, *One Piece At A Time*. (Continued on next page)